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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ISLAM: MORE ON CARTOON CONTROVERSY

REF: A) THE HAGUE 314; B) THE HAGUE 303; C) THE HAGUE 257

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Danish cartoon controversy continues to resonate in the Netherlands. Two small, generally peaceful demonstrations were held February 10 in Maastricht and February 11 in Amsterdam. Two well-known Muslim Amsterdam officials have attempted to downplay the issue in an effort to reduce tensions. Some mosques are advocating using the Dutch courts to address perceived grievances in lieu of violent protests. At least one mosque has filed suit over the cartoons and another over a news program they deemed offensive. FM Bot, traveling in Saudi Arabia, has reasserted the absolute right to free expression, "only limited by the law." Local governments in some areas have banned costumes depicting Mohammed to avoid inflaming Muslim community sensitivities during upcoming carnival. End Summary.

PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATIONS...

¶2. (SBU) Dutch-Muslims took to the streets in limited numbers February 11 in Maastricht and Amsterdam to express their anger at the Danish cartoons. In Maastricht, the crowd numbered roughly 100-150. In Amsterdam it was between 200-300 (ref b). Many observers attributed the low turnout to appeals by imams during Friday sermons for Muslims to stay home. Muslim community organizations such as Amsterdam's "Neighborhood Fathers" also publicly intervened to keep the demonstrations peaceful.

¶3. (SBU) CG and POLOFF observed the demonstration in Amsterdam's Dam Square, which was monitored closely by about 60 reporters and as many policemen. It was to be a silent protest, with no references to Denmark, but about 50 people chanted angry texts, and tore a Danish flag. At one point about 60 men, some with their young sons, stopped protesting ten minutes to pray, attracting media and spectator attention.

¶4. (SBU) The demonstration was multilingual - the first two verses of the Koran were chanted in Arabic, but signs in the crowd were in Dutch, Arabic and English. One sign said, in Dutch, "Provocation is pointless. Respect is the way." Another asked in Dutch, "Are freedom of speech and respect for faith incompatible?" One large banner simply advertised two web sites: [www.islamtomorrow.nl](#) and [www.al-islam.com](#). The most provocative sign seen by CG and Poloff was in English, carried by three teenaged Muslim girls, read "There is a hot place in hell for those who insult the Prophet Mohammed. Especially Hirsi Ali."

¶5. (SBU) Participants included many women and teenage girls, a few covered from head to toe, either accompanying their husbands or in small separate groups. Also in attendance were many Muslim families, including young children and babies, and native-Dutch who stopped to

observe the demonstration. One little girl sat on her father's shoulders with a sign, "I (heart) Mohammed."

. . . BUT SOME VIOLENCE AFTERWARDS

¶6. (SBU) Most of the Amsterdam demonstrators dispersed peacefully after three hours. One group of 40 to 70 youngsters, however, moved from the demonstration site to a busy shopping street where they smashed shop windows, knocked down store displays, and got into altercations with reporters attempting to film them. The young people reportedly chanted "Hamas," "Jihad," and "Hezbollah."

¶7. (SBU) According to press reports, the police arrested four individuals. An Embassy contact with the Amsterdam police acknowledged that they learned from the incident and will be better prepared next time. In statements to the press following the incidents, Mayor Job Cohen praised the Neighborhood Fathers and other groups for their efforts to maintain calm, and said it was pity that troublemakers had cast a slur on an otherwise good and peaceful demonstration. Some Muslim community figures also spoke out, with at least one Imam publicly calling on the perpetrators to have "more respect for the Prophet."

AMSTERDAM OFFICIALS GET THE JOKE

¶8. (SBU) Several days later, during a televised election debate, Amsterdam Alderman and mission contact Ahmed Aboutaleb called the Danish cartoons "funny." Aboutaleb, widely viewed as the most respected Muslim politician in the Netherlands, said only one cartoon, which showed the

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Prophet with a bomb-turban, was offensive. The rest, he said, were funny. Aboutaleb argued that freedom of opinion and expression is not negotiable, "but I do feel that people should try to use it responsibly". Another Muslim Amsterdam official and mission contact, Fatima Elatik, similarly downplayed the offensive nature of the cartoons and expressed her support for freedom of speech during a television broadcast last week.

MOSQUES WEIGH IN

¶9. (SBU) According to press reports, the boards of Moroccan mosques in Rotterdam appealed to their rank and file to stay calm. "Those who feel hurt could express their feelings through dialogue, protests or by going to court," said spokesman Talbi. "These cartoons should be no excuse to resort to violence or to vandalize property." The As-Soenah mosque in The Hague, meanwhile, announced on February 14 its intention to launch court proceedings against the Dutch news program NOVA for broadcasting a program it said was offensive and provocative.

BOT SPEAKS OUT

¶10. (SBU) Foreign Minister Bot, traveling in the Middle East, spoke out again on the cartoon controversy on February 14 following a meeting with Saudi King Abdullah. Bot stressed, "Our freedom of expression is in a certain sense an absolute freedom, only limited by law. Naturally, individual responsibility also plays a role." In response, King Abdullah acknowledged the right to free expression, but added, "this does not mean you can deliberately offend God. The same applies to all religions and prophets."

CARNIVAL RESTRICTIONS

¶11. (SBU) As citizens prepare for Carnival celebrations

throughout the Netherlands, organizers have warned that making fun of the Mohammed cartoon controversy or Islam will not be tolerated. In Maastricht, Heerlen, and Weert anyone dressed as Mohammed, or wearing a burqa, will not be allowed to walk in Carnival processions, as "regulations forbid offensive and insulting texts or impersonations." A spokesman for Oldenzaal, location of the largest Carnival in the north of The Netherlands, also said images or slogans about the Prophet would not be tolerated. "We wish to celebrate carnival with all sections of the community," he said, "The recent events in Denmark played a role in our decision." Only Den Bosch has refused to impose a ban believing most people have enough sense to know what is acceptable. A spokesman said 'mockery is traditionally chiefly directed at local rather than global events."

BLAKEMAN